



# Nebraska Department of Education

300 Centennial Mall South ♦ Lincoln, Nebraska ♦ 68508

## High Ability Learning

November 2020

### Gifted Students in Rural Settings



In a 2014 study by Howely et. al, it was put forward that half of the world's population lives in rural place. One definition of "rural" is not something that has been widely agreed upon, but most agree that it is a combination of geographic location and population density. It has been reported that most of the United States is geographically rural, but only 19.3% of people live in rural areas (United States Census Bureau, 2018).

Rural areas are not only defined by physical aspects, but themes and common threads that span across the rural experience as well. People in rural areas generally feel a strong sense of place, value tradition, strong roles of family and religion, and differing definitions of success from their urban and suburban counterparts (Richards & Stambaugh, 2015). No two rural communities are the same, but there are things that they share.

While we know this is a large swath of the country, there is little research about rural schooling, and even less research about gifted programs in rural areas. What we do know, though, has been studied by leading scholars in the field.

Much of Nebraska is rural and may face unique challenges due to geographic isolation, lack of resources, and small populations. In this edition, we will discuss identification methods unique to rural settings and strategies for serving gifted students in rural areas.



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# Identifying Gifted Students in Rural Settings

The rural experience brings a unique set of characteristics to students—this includes students who are high ability. This stems from a set of values often found in rural communities such as individualism, familism, love of place, modesty, strong sense of beauty (especially in nature), and patriotism (Stambaugh, 2015). Due to these values, giftedness may manifest differently for students in rural communities. Across different studies, researchers have found that some characteristics of rural gifted students may be prohibitive when identifying. These include:



- Speak non-standard, regional English; Less verbal communication skills
- Passive in the classroom
- Relatively unaffected by external pressure, such as time constraints
- More likely to be lax about completing homework and assignments
- Not likely to perform well on standardized tests
- Hesitant to “stand out” or excel

With these considerations in mind, they also possess unique strengths:

- Show exceptionality in one subject
- May show high-quality ideas when writing, but poor grammar, spelling, form, etc.
- More likely to demonstrate strengths outside of the classroom (4H, FFA, auto repair, music, etc.)
- Likely to perform better on non-verbal tests
- High discrepancies between scores; uneven score profiles

(Spicker, 1992)

With these considerations in mind, how can we identify these students who may not qualify with traditional methods such as IQ or achievement tests? One of the main factors that comes up across the research is professional development. While this is true in all areas of HAL, targeted professional development in rural areas increases the number of referrals when teachers are able to see high ability in a “non-traditional” way (Pendarvis & Wood, 2009).

Checklists of characteristics are a great way to help identify students, but using lists designed for urban and suburban students is not helpful in identifying rural students. Place-based measures are more likely to find more HAL students. Using checklists that are designed for the rural gifted population identifies more students. Place-based methods include things such as portfolios with outside work, community involvement, interviews of student and family, and performance-based, hands-on opportunities to showcase talent (Stambaugh 2015).

Involving the family and community in identification is crucial. Because of the strong sense of place and communalism in rural areas, the community and

## Updates

### Calling for feedback on Rule 3 Revision:

Interested in taking a survey or being part of a focus group for the revision of Rule 3? Email [sheyanne.meadows@nebraska.gov](mailto:sheyanne.meadows@nebraska.gov) to go on the list. Tell a friend!

### HAL and SEL Webinar Series:

There are 2 sessions left of the HAL and SEL Webinar Series. Watch previous sessions and register for upcoming sessions at <https://www.education.ne.gov/hal/hal-sel-webinar-series/>

### CoGAT Certification:

Interested in being trained to administer the CogAT? Email Sheyanne for more information

### Coming Soon:

Short video sessions (5-10 minutes) for instructional and identification strategies. They can be viewed any time on the website! Email Sheyanne if you have a recommendation or would like to see a specific strategy.



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family play a huge role in the lives of gifted students. Families and community may see characteristics outside of the classroom that are HAL characteristics (Stambaugh, 2015). Using multiple measures and local norms are best-practice across all gifted populations, but it is especially beneficial for HALs in rural settings. Because students may have discrepant scores, using subtests to find strengths and identify in certain areas will yield better results than overall achievement. No one test should exclude a student, but one test can include a student. It is best to determine based on a complete profile of the student (Stambaugh, 2015). Implementing these strategies in rural areas will ensure HALs are being identified across Nebraska. Considering context and unique characteristics are of the utmost importance when working with this unique population.

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## HAL Spotlight: Lisa Pack

The purpose of the HAL Spotlight is to allow you to connect and meet your counterparts across the state. Feel free to reach out to one another! Establishing a cohesive network is super important, and it reminds us that we all have one common goal—serving HAL students.

The educator in the spotlight this month is Lisa Pack at Crofton Community Schools. Ms. Pack wears multiple hats, from technology coach to HAL co-coordinator, but she always keeps students at the center. Her passion for education, willingness to always learn something new, and care for students and families are evident in everything she does.



Instructional Tech Coach, Assistive Technology Coordinator, HAL Co-Coordinator, DAC, Miscellaneous Small School Tasks, and always Student Advocate  
Crofton Community Schools  
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### **How long have you been in this position?** *(I changed to this profession)*

*This is my third year at Crofton Community Schools. Prior to that, I worked for two years in Phoenix, AZ for a company that provided instructional technology PD throughout the Phoenix Union District and surrounding area. Before that, I worked for 29 years at Norfolk Public Schools in several roles. I started as a resource teacher, then an assistive technology coordinator, and instructional technology coach. I also teach graduate instructional technology courses for Doane University going on 25 years now.*

### **What is your favorite part about working with High Ability Learners?**

*I feel blessed to work closely with the entire spectrum of learners in all curriculum areas. I believe it gives a unique perspective on the needs of all students. My beginnings are steeped in special education. Helping those that struggle to break down barriers and find their strengths is my mission.*



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Early on, I discovered technology was the equalizer. It could support, remediate, and give access to the struggling learner.

I also found it could be the accelerator and spark. Through the years, I have had the pleasure of working with several twice-exceptional students. There is nothing more satisfying than being a part of helping support a student's weaknesses and mentor to magnify their talents.

### **What are some challenges you have faced working with HALs?**

...Another challenge we face is finding time to meet regularly with our HAL students. Our school is very rich in extracurricular activities and most of our students are involved in multiple opportunities. Through Sheyanne's Zooms, we've noticed our program is different than most. We serve 7-12 students. The only time we have to work with students is during homeroom. Understandably, this is when students involved in sports or clubs are already pulled. It's difficult to be consistent to get projects and clubs going.

The more I work with HAL students the more I believe we need to start younger. When learning habits begin to form. Not unlike the other end of the spectrum. The earlier we provide intervention, supports, and enhancements the better. We look forward to collaborating with the state to further evolve our program.

### **What are some of your fears for the school year?**

If it were a normal year, my fear would be not making a difference for all of my students. This year, HOLY COW! I fear for my vulnerable parents I care for and live with, my students' and staffs' social-emotional health, being able to connect with students virtually and in person, supporting teachers, parents, and students with the new norms, but most of all I fear students with their mask below their nose!

### **What is something you would like to tell other HAL people across the state? Is there any advice or anything you would like to say?**

My advice is to reach out and join Sheyanne in her efforts to rebuild our State HAL Program. Sheyanne has been a bright spot during this crazy year. I attended a couple of Zooms with her this fall and immediately knew she was someone we needed to collaborate and brainstorm with. She made it easy. All we needed to do was ask and she responded within minutes, "Name a time!". She might be young, but she impresses me with her ideas and quality of experience. I have long felt that our high ability learners have been neglected. I am looking forward to working with her as she begins to build the state program.

### **What do you like to do in your free time?**

In my free time, I enjoy spending time watching and discussing a couple of shows with my Mom and then telling her about my day at school. I also LOVE creating videos. It is my passion and I believe it is an educational superpower. My favorite video types are green screen projects, Six Word-Six Shot stories, Paperslide, and explainer videos. I spend many hours designing green screen sets and scripting. Check out our Warrior Way News site for a peek at some of our work: [bit.ly/warriorwaynews](http://bit.ly/warriorwaynews)



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# Strategies for Serving Gifted Students in Rural Areas: Challenges and Opportunities



Connection with the land, small class sizes, and strong community bonds are all positive characteristics of living in a rural setting, but it is not without its challenges—especially in serving high ability learners. Across several studies, there were themes that emerged for common barriers to programming. Some of the obvious challenges include lack of funding, resources, and time, as well as lack of teacher training (Lewis & Boswell, 2020). Access and transportation were also cited as common issues for

quality HAL programming. Because of geographic isolation, providing enriching experiences that are often commonplace for urban students (museums, university visits, etc.) are difficult for their rural counterparts. Lack of public transportation exacerbates this discrepancy (Mattingly & Schaefer, 2015).

In addition to barriers within the school, the value of gifted programs in rural communities tend to be lower than in non-rural areas. A study was done with several rural towns in Texas, and this is not due to the community not wanting to support students, but many do not understand the gifted programs, so it is difficult to support something for which you have no information.

Additionally, misperceptions of gifted programs as treating identified students as “better” than others may cause community backlash, as well as the high priority of athletics over academics (Lewis & Boswell, 2020).

These barriers are not insurmountable. There are many strategies that can be used in rural areas to support HALs. Not all gifted programs have to be expensive or require extensive amounts of time. Below are some options:

## Grouping

Putting students together based on readiness, achievement, and/or ability is one of the simplest and cheapest strategies for schools to use. When used with appropriate differentiation, students being with like-ability peers will go a long way. Countless studies have shown success with flexible ability grouping (Gentry, 2014; Gentry & Owen, 1999; Kulik, 2003); Rogers, 1993), as long as it is used appropriately. One of the pitfalls of flexible grouping is the conflation with tracking. While we know that tracking is when students are placed in groups with no way in and no way out, flexible grouping should be based on constant assessment to move the students appropriately.

Similarly, cluster grouping is an effective strategy for HALs. Cluster grouping, which is popular in elementary settings, is putting all of the gifted students in a grade in one class with other varying-ability peers. This allows one teacher, preferably trained in HAL, to pay specific attention to the affective and academic needs of the HAL students instead of every teacher at that level having a handful in each class (Seward & Gentry, 2015).

Again, grouping comes at no additional cost to the district. Implementing grouping strategies not only allows for interaction between students of similar ability, but allows a teacher or group of teachers to focus on HAL students and their needs.



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## Acceleration

Using acceleration strategies is another way to meet the needs of HALs with virtually no additional cost. Acceleration, defined by Pressey, is an educational intervention that moves a student with high ability through an educational program at a rate faster than their same-aged peers (1943). There are over twenty kinds of acceleration, but they can be separated into two categories: content-based and grade-based (Southern & Jones, 2015). Grade-based acceleration shortens the amount of time in the K-12 system (grade-skipping, telescoping, early entrance, etc.), whereas content-based keeps students with their grade mates, but receive instruction at a higher level (single-subject acceleration, AP, extracurricular programs, etc.). While acceleration may be seen as damaging to a student's psychosocial development, there is no research to support this claim. In fact, acceleration has overwhelmingly positive effects based on research. In one study, Karen Rogers found that students made 3/5 of a year's additional growth in the accelerated subject, with a significant effect size of .57 (1992). Additionally, in a separate study done by Karen Rogers, she notes a positive effect size of .46 for socialization of gifted students who experience acceleration (1998). Both of these numbers are statistically significant.

AP classes are an excellent way to engage high ability students, but rural areas may lack trained staff and access to curriculum. Allowing HALs to use technology to take AP courses at other schools or courses offered online forwards students the opportunity to take advanced coursework even if it is not offered in their school. Dual enrollment with postsecondary institutions is also a great resource. Students who are high ability may finish their required coursework before their chronological peers or they need more of a challenge than their current classes. Being able to take classes on campus or online for college credit not only challenges them, but gives them a head start on their college career.

## Advanced Curriculum

While advanced curriculum does require some time and additional resources, much of the differentiation for HALs can be done at the general education classroom level. There are several strategies that can be employed to help meet the needs of gifted students in rural settings. One option is to purchase advanced curriculum that a teacher can use easily for their HALs. For example, federal Javits grants have been used to write research-based curriculum, such as Project Athena, Project Clarion, M3, and Mentoring Mathematical Minds. The William and Mary Center for Gifted Education and Vanderbilt Programs for Talented Youth also put out curriculum that is based on best practices. Because students in rural areas are often in areas of poverty, scaffolds to access higher-level curriculum may be needed. Things such as graphic organizers and other visual aids may be useful (VanTassel Baska & Stambaugh, 2006).

Using independent learning models or learning contracts are another way to meet needs within the school day. In rural areas, gifted students may not have the opportunity to work collaboratively with someone of similar ability or interest. Independently-driven work provides rigor and relevance for these students. Having a range of options for problem-based, critical inquiry projects designed in conjunction with the student will yield the best results (VanTassel Baska & Hubbard, 2015). This may look like a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student doing an independent research study during science time, or a middle school student doing an advanced novel study for ELA. For students who have an area of passion in which they are talented, mentorships and internships are an excellent opportunity. In lieu of a class they could test out of or a subject in



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which they are far beyond grade-level, they would meet with an expert in the community, shadow someone in the field, or even connect via technology with a practitioner in their field of interest. This not only allows for a productive experience for the student, but it often creates pathways into the community and job field. As noted by VanTassel Baska and Hubbard, “Because rural communities accept and accommodate differences among learners, individual opportunities for learning can be effective enhancements beyond the school curriculum” (2015).

Most mentors or role models are willing to donate their time to the student or school, minimizing the cost for this strategy.

In conclusion, while there are barriers to serving HAL students in rural settings, there are many strategies and resources available. Rural communities are unique and come with their own strengths, and we can leverage these to support all students—not forgetting our top students who may fly under the radar in school.



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